



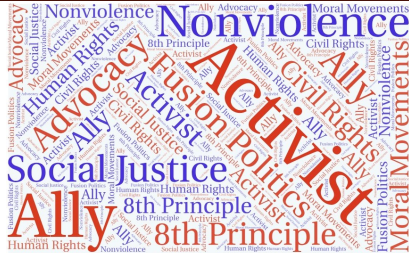
# Touchstones Project

a monthly journal of Unitarian Universalism

August 2023

## Activism

## Wisdom Story



### Introduction to the Theme

The feature article of the Winter 2017 issue of the *UU World* magazine was, *Do you have to be an activist to be a Unitarian Universalist?* (See <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/activism-unitarian-universalist>). The answer to that question is “No,” which was generally the response of the six Unitarian Universalists interviewed by Kenny Wiley and Christopher Walton. Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin wrote, “This isn’t about calling yourself an activist or an organizer or anything else—it is about being a person who lives out their principles [e.g., dignity, justice, equity, and compassion] in their home, at the job, in their congregation, and anywhere else their life might take them.”

While we do not have to be an activist to be a Unitarian Universalist, we still

may be willing “side with love” in other vital ways.

**Education:** In a world with alternate truths, allegations of fake news, outright lies, and propaganda designed to manipulate, mislead, and distort or omit facts, educating ourselves is essential. According to George Orwell, “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” The words are true, but in the spirit of truth, they were misattributed to Orwell. Learning the truth and sharing it is also a revolutionary act in a time of deceit.

**Position:** Acknowledging our position in society can be transformative, especially if we occupy a previously unacknowledged position of privilege. The emerging self-awareness allows us to understand inequity better and listen to people who are marginalized. It involves reflecting on one’s biases, blind spots, and assumptions and actively engaging with an expanded perspective.

**Witness:** Unitarian poet ee cummings captured the essence of being a witness when he wrote, “(now the ears of my ears awake and / now the eyes of my

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### Children’s Movement for Peace

*Touchstones*

Colombia, a country in South America, has had armed conflict since their civil war, *The Violence*, in the 1950s, through ongoing battles with rebels that began in the 1960s and continued by drug- and gang-related violence in the 1980s.

This violence was the world in which Mayerly Sánchez, born in 1984, and her older sister, Yeimi, were growing up. Earlier, her parents, José Manuel and Hilda, and thousands of other refugees fled the rebel conflict in rural areas. They built a small, mud-brick house with three rooms on empty land in Soacha, a neighborhood outside Columbia’s capital city, Bogotá. They and their neighbors were poor, but they had electricity, running water, and some paved roads.

Mayerly’s life changed when World Vision, an international aid organization, sponsored her and other children. With the help of World Vision, Mayerly, just seven, her next-door neighbor and best friend, Milton, and others started a children’s peace club to steer kids away from drugs, crime, and violence. They organized soccer games and invited gang members to join in. They put on plays about peace, first for families and later for the entire community. Mayerly did not know it at the time, but she was becoming an activist, a person who works to make the world a better place.

At 15, Milton, probably under pressure, joined a youth gang. On January 28, 1996, he was stabbed several times in a fight with another gang and died.

*(Continued on page 2)*

### Activism & Regeneration

Regeneration can be necessary for groups or communities. When it is in response to oppression, injustice, or violence, the architects of regeneration include activists. Visions for this include UUs’ Beloved Community, Christians’ Peaceable Kingdom, and Jews’ *Tikkun Olam*, which means the repair of the world. Activists strive to repair through their focus on social justice. Since activism is best done by working with others on an issue, our congregations are well-suited to support such work. To be effective, it requires learning how to be a good ally. Activism can be exhausting and disappointing, so having a spiritual practice is essential, but it can also be rewarding when the moral arc of the universe is bent toward justice.

### A Theme-Based Ministry Project

This project is supported by subscriptions from Unitarian Universalist congregations.

## Regeneration

(Continued from page 1) **Wisdom Story**

Mayerly was devastated. Milton had been like a brother to her. She promised to do something to change things, although she wasn't sure what.

Mayerly worked even harder for the children's peace club. Then, UNICEF invited her and other youth leaders in Colombia to a children's peace-building conference. Following this, Mayerly and others created the *Children's Movement for Peace (Movimiento de los Niños por La Paz)*. She and 24 other Colombian teenagers drafted the *Children's Mandate for Peace and Rights*. It listed 12 rights for children, like the right to education, justice, and peace, and the right to love and family. Mayerly and other teenagers campaigned to encourage children to vote. On a special ballot on October 25, 1996, 2,700,000 Colombian children voted for their right to peace and more. A year later, nearly ten million adults voted for a *Citizens' Mandate for Peace (El Mandato Ciudadano por la Paz)*, which called for peace, life, and liberty.

In 1998, and for the next three years, the *Children's Movement for Peace*, with Mayerly as a spokesperson, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Although they didn't win, Mayerly and other youth leaders from Colombia went to a conference at The Hague in the Netherlands. It was the *Hague Appeal for Peace*, and the youth were there to discuss the plight of children in Colombia.

In 2001, when Mayerly was 16, the *Children's Movement for Peace* was awarded the *World's Children's Prize* by one of the world's most extensive education programs empowering children to become changemakers. This award coincided with the United Nations launching its *Decade for the Culture of Peace*.

Mayerly is still an activist. Following her college education with journalism and marketing degrees, she went to work for World Vision. She is still working to create a better world for children, including her daughters, Maria Jose and Isabella.

Sources: Tapestry of Faith, World Vision, World's Children's Prize, and Global Peace Warriors

## Five Smooth Stones

James Luther Adams (1901-1994), a UU theologian, educator, and activist, saw activism as essential, having witnessed Nazism when he studied theology in Germany. In a 1939 essay, *Guiding Principles of a Free Faith*, Adams gave us five smooth stones.

In 1 Samuel 17:40-51, the Philistine, Goliath, and Israelite, David, then a shepherd, met in combat. Remember, the Philistines defeated the Israelites at the Battle of Aphek and captured the Ark of the Covenant. Before David confronted his foe, he chose five smooth stones from a brook to use in his sling. These stones seemed pathetic compared to Goliath's shield, sword, and spear, yet David felled Goliath with a single stone. Then the other Philistines fled. Adams described our five smooth stones.

**First**, Adams said that revelation is continuous, which means that truth is neither static nor absolute. New truth is always emerging, therefore everything in existence is subject to being questioned and modified.

**Second**, we should base our relationships with others on consent, not coercion. This is the heart of freedom. Consent is a feature of effective coalition building and being an ally. When practiced well, it can be transformational.

**Third**, as religious people, we are morally obligated to establish a just and loving community within our congregations and the world. Our congregations do not exist solely for us. They must also benefit the world.

**Fourth**, good things don't just happen; people make them happen. Adams wrote, "Good must be ...given form and power...."

**Fifth**, the resources exist to justify ultimate optimism. Change will not be easy or quick, but we can gather the necessary resources to make a difference.

In summary, question everything, join freely with others in a cause, work to create a beloved community, and believe that you can bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice because you have the smooth stones to do so.

Source: Touchstones

## Do What You Can

Bernie Glassman

I'm basically a simple person. The way I look at the issues ...is to bring it back to our own bodies.

...If I see myself on the streets as a homeless person or as somebody who's defoliating the forest, I'll say, "That's me doing this, so what can I do about it?" I'll do what I can. That's my only answer. I don't have any solutions, because I don't know. That's the first tenet of our [Zen] Peacemaker Community. ...We approach every situation from the standpoint of not knowing. ...That means being completely open, listening. And then doing whatever we can do. Not saying, "I don't have enough money ... knowledge ...enlightenment. I don't have ...." But saying, "Here's what I do have"—and then doing the best actions that we can.

So, approach the situation in a state of not knowing. Then bear witness to it. Try to become it, and out of that, I believe, automatically will come the right actions.



...There's a story of a *bodhisattva* who finds an empty well and sees a mountain covered with snow and climbs up the mountain with a spoon and gets a spoonful of snow, comes down, puts it in the well, and then goes back up the mountain. He keeps doing that, not with any sense that he's actually going to fill the well with water, but simply because that's what's needed. I preach activism. What I try to encourage folks to do is to do whatever they can with whatever they have at the moment.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=366>

# Readings from the Common Bowl

**Day 1:** "Activism without spirituality is often fueled by anger and despair.



Spirituality without activism is often empty and disconnected from the world. The true path lies in their integration." Thich Nhat Hanh

**Day 2:** "I think that another word for activism is... imagination. Because it's about this idea of being able to envision a world that doesn't yet exist." Eddie Ndopu

**Day 3:** "My activism pays the rent on being alive and being here on the planet. If I weren't active politically, I would feel as if I were sitting back eating at the banquet without washing the dishes or preparing the food." Alice Walker

**Day 4:** "Activism is the oxygen of democracy." John F. Kennedy

**Day 5:** "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest." Elie Wiesel

**Day 6:** "I think ...the job of an activist is ... to ...create ...a new world order that is really equitable and that is really fair and that's just and sustainable." Eddie Ndopu

**Day 7:** "Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world." Kerry Washington

**Day 8:** "Activism is not about waiting for the right moment; it's about creating the right moment." Ai Weiwei

**Day 9:** "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." Elie Wiesel

**Day 10:** "Get up, stand up, Stand up for your rights. Get up, stand up, Don't give up the fight." Bob Marley

**Day 11:** "Activism is my art. It's how I express myself and make a difference in the world." Shepard Fairey

**Day 12:** "Advocacy is not a luxury. It's a necessity. We advocate for our survival." Eddie Ndopu

**Day 13:** "I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or

against. I'm a human being, first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole." Malcolm X

**Day 14:** "Our job is to grow the flame of equality and justice.... When people own and contribute to social change, they become guardians of that progress, and they'll do whatever it takes to safeguard it and nurture it." Angélique Kidjo

**Day 15:** "I didn't wake up and decide to become an activist. But you couldn't help notice the inequities, the injustices. It was all around you." Yuri Kochiyama

**Day 16:** "Quiet activism is fine, but people are also needed on the front lines. Let's be sure we affirm all kinds of actions for justice and peace." Jane Vennard

**Day 17:** "Life has an elegance that far exceeds anything we might devise. Perhaps the wisdom lies in knowing when to sit back and wait for it to unfold. Too hasty an activism may lead to lesser outcomes and, more important, may cause us to trust ourselves rather than learning to trust life." Rachel Naomi Remen

**Day 18:** "Understanding that all acts of peace or violence begin in our minds, learning to keep the peace in our own hearts is one of the highest forms of activism." Joel & Michelle Levey

**Day 19:** "Every act of gratitude is incomplete unless it issues in a sending forth to do works that will make for justice." Maria Harris

**Day 20:** "Service was as much a part of my upbringing as eating breakfast and going to school. It isn't something that you do in your spare time. It was ...the very purpose of life. In that context, you're not obligated to win. You're obligated to keep trying." Marian Wright Edelman

**Day 21:** "Spirituality and activism go hand in hand, for they are both born out of the desire to heal and transform ourselves and the world around us." Bell Hooks

**Day 22:** "Life being what it is, if we don't make a difference by trying, we'll make a

difference by not trying." William Sloane Coffin

**Day 23:** "The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys his own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom...." Thomas Merton

**Day 24:** "We are all in need of communities in which to face the dark times in which we live, to speak and listen to our pain for the world. We need to learn together how to use the energy of our fear and sorrow to mobilize ourselves...." Miriam Greenspan

**Day 25:** "Many of us didn't choose to become activists. We were activated. We could not stand to sit on the sidelines while our people were brutalized so needlessly." Cori Bush

**Day 26:** "Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world." Dolores Huerta

**Day 27:** "I have referred to myself as an accidental activist on more than one occasion." Joan Blades

**Day 28:** "An activist is someone who makes an effort to see problems that are not being addressed and

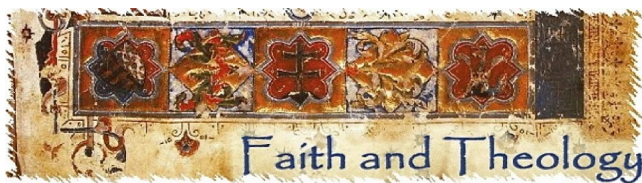
then makes an effort to make their voice heard." Joanne Woodward

**Day 29:** "Do you force your kids to pay attention to what's going on, or do you let them live their lives outside of it? My hope is that my child is a strong activist." Eddie Vedder

**Day 30:** "I think I was a born civil rights activist. I can't stand the smashing of a community. It's not fair and it's not right." Pauley Perrette

**Day 31:** "True activism is not merely about raising your voice; it is about using your voice as a catalyst for meaningful action. It is about standing up for justice, equality, and human rights, and refusing to be silent in the face of injustice. Activism is the embodiment of hope and the belief that we have the power to create a better world." Desmond Tutu





those advanced by individuals. The following list is representative but not exhaustive.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as

above, it was religious tolerance.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, religious freedom, abolition of slavery, women's rights and gender equality, public education, and prison reform engaged our passions.

Activism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century included the abolition of slavery, women's rights and suffrage, education reform, the temperance movement, the Social Gospel movement, prison reform, labor rights, and nonviolent resistance, including civil disobedience.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century's activism encompassed civil rights, women's rights (i.e., suffrage, reproductive rights & gender equality), anti-war and peace, environmental justice, economic justice, immigrant and refugee rights, and LGBTQ+ rights (e.g., marriage equality).

This century's unfolding work has engaged racial justice (e.g., Back Lives Matter, police brutality, white supremacy, etc.) LGBTQ+ rights, immigration & refugee rights, gender equality & women's rights (e.g., reproductive rights, equal pay, sexual harassment & gender-based violence), democracy (e.g., voting rights and gerrymandering), indigenous people's rights, economic justice (e.g., minimum wage laws), and book banning.

Our effectiveness has been mixed, given the magnitude and intractability of the issues, and the power interests, both political and financial, arrayed in opposition. Regrettably, we have also made missteps, notably in our decades-long work against racism. The ongoing, courageous critique by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Communities, including the work done by Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU), has helped foster an engagement that acknowledges the reality of white supremacy and all that is associated with it. The energy around the 8<sup>th</sup> principle (which Canadian Unitarians have adopted) has been a critical factor. It spurred a reexamination of Article II of the UUA bylaws, including the principles and sources. This "journey toward wholeness" suggests that a theology of activism needs to be grounded in humility, an openness that is aware of

defensive behaviors that undermine dialogue, the ability and willingness to be a good ally, and deep listening that can surface our hidden assumptions and open us to new understandings.

The goal of our activism, given our 7<sup>th</sup> principle, goes beyond social justice, i.e., economic, political, and social rights and opportunities for everyone. Our pursuit of environmental justice, especially climate justice acknowledges the importance of the interdependent web.

A theology of activism encourages us to move from the comfort of like-mindedness to the more profound, yet challenging embrace of like-heartedness that encourages us to see beyond differences to embrace our common humanity. Encourage means to "put heart into" because activism requires courage.

A theology of activism is prophetic. It critiques an existing condition and calls us to bring a new reality into being. Rev. Marilyn Sewell writes, "So what does prophetic Unitarian Universalism look like? We come to understand that our life is quite literally connected with all that is and that we can never be separated from the Whole. We become *bodhisattvas* of sorts, dedicated to compassion for all suffering beings, and we act out of that understanding in the larger world."

A theology of activism is an engaged pluralism in which we seek to understand others despite differences. According to the *Pluralism Project*, "Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. It is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference." Pluralism recognizes that different perspectives and experiences contribute to a richer understanding of social issues and informs the work of activism. Applied to our congregations, it is the work of making them an inclusive space that honors and celebrates diverse identities and experiences, and fosters dialogue that promotes empathy, understanding, and shared wisdom. The name for such a space is Beloved Community. A theology of activism seeks to create Beloved Community by bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice. It is the work of a lifetime, of many lifetimes.

Source: Touchstones

## Bending the Moral Arc

A Unitarian Universalist theology of activism is grounded in our principles, from "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" to our "respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part." It is informed by our second source, "Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love," which asks that we take seriously and oppose the "powers and structures of evil." Echoing Martin Luther King, Jr., it asks that we engage our opponents in the struggle for justice with "the transforming power of love."

Our long history of working for justice began with the struggle for our existence in the religious crucible of the Reformation in Transylvania in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Unitarian minister Ferenc Dávid (aka Francis David), who led the struggle for religious freedom, perished in a prison cell on November 15, 1579, in the fortress atop the mountain in Deva, Transylvania (now Romania). His crime was religious innovation, insisting on praying to God, not Jesus, as Jesus instructed. While Dávid did not say, "We do not need to think alike to love alike," the sentiment perfectly captures a theology of activism, one, as above, that we ground in love.

Our Transylvanian Unitarian roots inform our activism in another way. They



adopted as their symbol, not a flaming chalice but a dove on top of a mountain encircled by a serpent with a crown. Jesus said, per Matthew 10:16, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." The crown recalls the reigns (1540-51 & 1556-70) of John Sigismund Zápolya, the only Unitarian King. The dove symbolizes peace, the serpent, wisdom. The mountain may refer to the firm foundation of faith in the face of challenge or adversity.

As a faith, we have engaged in many social issues over time, including

### A Child Shall Lead Them

Helping children become activists can be a powerful way to foster their engagement with the world.

Modeling activism is an effective way to teach children. Show children how to take action by volunteering, doing community service, supporting causes, engaging in child-friendly protest, and advocating for change. Your actions will inspire them and demonstrate the importance of standing up for what they believe in. This modeling can also involve learning about child activists like Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, or Bana Alabed.



Encourage children to explore their interests and passions. Ask them what upsets them about the world? Help them to identify causes they care about deeply and support their involvement in related activities or organizations. This could include raising money to contribute to Heifer International (<https://www.heifer.org/>) who give farm animals to families, donating socks to a homeless shelter, etc.

Challenge children to think critically about the world around them. Help them explore issues, ask questions, and discuss different ideas that they and others have. Teach them how to get more information about an issue.

Help children develop empathy by encouraging them to understand the experiences and challenges faced by others. Foster compassion by teaching them to care about social and environmental issues and the impact they have on people's lives. Many children's books explore social issues that invite empathy and compassion.

Encourage learning about specific

issues like poverty, lack of access to clean water, the experience of refugees, animal welfare, etc. Explore and explain these topics in age-appropriate ways using examples that they can relate to. Again, children's books are an excellent gateway to many issues, both contemporary and historical.

Create a safe space for children to express their thoughts and opinions, and to ask questions. Engage them in discussions about current events and issues that interest them. Encourage active listening and respectful communication with others.

Inspire children to take action and make a difference. Encourage them to start small, like running a neighborhood clean-up or food bank drive. Help them understand that even small actions can have a positive impact and empower them to grow their efforts over time.

Activism can be challenging and may involve setbacks or criticism. Teach children to stay resilient, hopeful, and creative in the face of obstacles, setbacks, or opposition. Help them understand that their voices matter and that they can make a difference, even when faced with challenges.

Source: Touchstones

### Family Activity: *Whose House?*

*This is Our House* is by Michael Rosen, author and Bob Graham, illustrator. "George has made a house using a cardboard box, and he says that no one else at the playground can come in. Not Lindy, because George's house 'isn't for girls,' nor Freddie, because it 'isn't for small people.' Sophie can't come in because, George says, 'This house isn't for people with glasses.' But when George leaves his house for a moment, everyone piles in, and on his return, George gets a taste of his own medicine." Watch the video of the book at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQa04z0fCSw> (5:07).

Discuss these questions with your children. What was unfair in the story? Why did George act the way he did? What lessons did George learn? Were there other ways that George could have learned that he was being unfair? What are other examples of unfairness? How can they be addressed?

### Third Reconstruction of Hope

The First Reconstruction (1866-1877) empowered blacks in America to exercise political and economic power because of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments. The federal government's abrupt end of Reconstruction enforcement ushered in Jim Crow laws at the state and local levels that enforced racial segregation and restricted voting rights.

The Second Reconstruction was started by the Civil Rights movement (1954 to 1968), resulting in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The right's backlash has rolled these gains back, driven by Supreme Court decisions, gerrymandering, and state-level voter suppression laws.

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 marked the beginning of a Third Reconstruction because his presidency generated enormous hope and a backlash that unleashed the forces of white supremacy and white Christian nationalism. Senate Minority Leader McConnell said that the only thing that mattered was making Obama a one-term president. When Obama was elected again, McConnell launched his bid to install a conservative majority on the Supreme Court.

The Rev. William Barber II has been a prime mover of the Third Reconstruction. As president of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP from 2006 to 2017, he co-founded the *Moral Monday Movement* in North Carolina in April 2013. Their weekly protests at the state capitol challenged regressive policies and advocated for progressive causes such as Medicaid expansion, voting rights, fair wages, and LGBTQ+ rights. It continues its vital work ten years later.

Barber and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove wrote *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear*. Barber explains, "Though we ended Jim Crow segregation in the 1960s, structural inequality became more sophisticated in the backlash against the movement's advances. Nothing less than a Third Reconstruction holds the promise of healing our nation's wounds and birthing a

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# Activism Is Much More Than Marches Or Protests

(Continued from page 1) **Introduction**

eyes are opened)." In the presence of a witness, lies wither away, and the truth emerges. The world bore witness to the murder of George Floyd because of the witness of 17-year-old Darnella Frazier, who recorded the video of his arrest, and the moral arc of the universe bent ever so slightly toward justice. She said in court, "When I look at George Floyd, I look at my dad."

**Lamentation:** If we let the world touch us, we may respond as the poet Adrienne Rich: "My heart is moved by all I cannot save: / so much has been destroyed / I have to cast my lot with those / who age after age, perversely, / with no extraordinary power, / reconstitute the world." As Amin writes, "A prophetic Unitarian Universalism is intentional about making space for lament." Through lamentation, we express deep sorrow, anguish, and regret about violence, oppression, and injustice and their consequences.

**Spiritual Nurturance, Support, Gratitude & Celebration:** Secondary activism refers to a form of activism that focuses on indirect actions and support. As Rev. Ranwa Hammamy writes, "It is ...the creation of music and art that share truths that cannot be captured by words alone, ...the preparation of a hot meal for the countless protesters who have been sitting outside in the cold, ... to love actively in the face of a broken world." It is to support the activists on the front line, to express our gratitude for their commitment and courage, and to celebrate them.

**Community Service:** Community service supports activism by providing visible, tangible actions to address social issues and create positive change. Service projects can raise awareness about specific issues by starting conversations, challenging misconceptions, and encouraging critical thinking. Hands-on opportunities can also serve as a gateway for people to join the broader movement. The visible outcomes of community service initiatives can inspire others to recognize their capacity to make a difference and encourage a more robust culture of activism.

The above creates a foundation for activism. The beauty of a congregation is that it can support and honor many

paths and spiritual disciplines. Ideally, activism has a spiritual grounding, which was the counsel of Unitarian Universalist minister William Houff in his 1989 book, *Infinity in Your Hand: a guide for the spiritually curious*. He explored the spiritual basis for social action, writing, "A vital religious movement which would live responsibly in the world must also attend to the needs of the heart and spirit." Ever the social activist, he was aware of the pitfalls of ignoring spirituality. Houff wrote, "If we attempt to do good before having come to terms with our own egotism, brokenness, alienation, incompleteness, neediness, then these will tend to contaminate our motives and our actions." He continued, "If we would change the world for the better, we must begin by changing ourselves." It is not spirituality or activism; it



is both based upon our personality and inclinations. As bell hooks writes, "Spirituality and activism go hand in hand, for they are both born out of the desire to heal and transform ourselves and the world around us."

Activism is much more than marches or protests, as crucial as those can be in seeking to change hearts and minds. Activism challenges the status quo, gives a voice to the marginalized, inspires collective action, demands accountability, promotes empathy and compassion, and encourages collective action as it seeks "to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice." The following are some of the elements of activism.

**Advocacy:** Advocates use research to understand an issue's complexities, develop strategies to challenge the power dynamics, engage stakeholders to understand their perspectives and concerns, speak publicly to inform, challenge, and motivate people, lobby for legislative changes, organize public awareness cam-

paigns and demonstrations, and use media platforms to amplify their message.

Eva Marie Lewis connects activism to advocacy writing, "To be an activist is to speak. To be an advocate is to listen. Society can't move forward without both."

**Grassroots Mobilization:** Grassroots mobilization organizes and inspires people at the ground level to work collectively on an issue. It begins with relationship building and networking to identify people, local leaders, and community organizations to build momentum from the bottom up to support an issue.

Barack Obama, a community organizer from 1985 to 1988 on Chicago's far South Side, wrote, "The best education I received was working with people in the community on a grassroots basis. Because what it taught me was that ordinary people, when they are working together can do extraordinary things."

**Nonviolent Resistance:** Nonviolent resistance is a social change method that relies on nonviolent tactics, including protests, strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience. It generates moral and ethical power and often gains support from diverse segments of society, which helps to make movements more inclusive and effective.

Wally Nelson, a civil rights activist, wrote, "Nonviolence is the constant awareness of the dignity and the humanity of oneself and others; it seeks truth and justice; it renounces violence both in method and in attitude; it is a courageous acceptance of active love and goodwill as the instrument with which to overcome evil and transform ...oneself and others."

**Collaboration & Coalition-building:** Activists know the power of forming alliances with other diverse individuals, groups, or organizations. Activists can amplify their impact and share resources and expertise by joining forces. The possibilities for common cause are driven by an awareness of intersectionality, which acknowledges that oppressions (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, anti-LGBTQ+, xenophobia, ableism, etc.) are often intertwined. Through coalition building, activists can increase diversity while fostering inclusivity and surfacing systemic biases within their ranks.

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(Continued from page 5) **Third Reconstruction** better future for all." Barber's approach to activism, including his *Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, is informed by the Civil Rights movement. His activism includes:

**Fusion Politics:** Create coalitions based on shared moral values rather than specific policy areas, values that cut across diverse and intersecting issues.

**Moral Revival:** "Rooted in faith traditions and Constitutional principles that require confronting injustice with sustained moral articulation, moral analysis, and moral action," a moral revival can appeal to people's moral sensibilities, transcend partisan divisions, and enlist and motivate diverse individuals.

**Moral Language and Narratives:** Framing issues in moral language and narratives can challenge dominant myths, engage people on a moral and emotional level, and inspire action.

**Nonviolent Civil Disobedience:** This continues to be an effective strategy to build solidarity and pressure those in power to address systemic issues.

**Intersectionality:** By understanding and addressing the intersecting systems of oppression, activists can create a broader, more inclusive, and more powerful movement for social change.

**Grassroots Organizing:** This approach may be drop-by-drop slow, but it can become a mighty stream for justice. As MLK said, "We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

**Public Awareness:** Maximize public awareness to draw media attention to specific issues and encourage public engagement and debate.

**Electoral Engagement:** Voter registration, mobilization, and political engagement can effect meaningful change.

Barber wrote, "Only a fusion coalition representing ... people in any place could push a moral agenda over and against the interests of the powerful. But such coalitions are never possible without radical patience and stubborn persistence." He added, "While realism cannot determine the goals of our faith, it must shape our strategy in movements of moral dissent." Source: Touchstones

## The Oppression of Silence

Audre Lorde (1934-9292), a Caribbean-American poet, professor, essayist, feminist, and lesbian icon, was an anti-war, civil rights, and human rights activist. Her teaching focused on literature, creative writing, and African American studies, although her concerns regarding social issues were quite broad. Lorde's literary legacy includes two memoirs, two books of essays, and over 300 poems.

Lorde's 1984 book *Sister Outsider* included essays like *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, *The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism*, and *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*.

It also included her 1977 speech, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, delivered to the Midwest Modern Language Association. In it, she wrote, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect." She wrote this as she confronted her mortality when her doctor found a tumor. Lorde continued, "I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive, and might not have been." The tumor was benign, but weeks of unknowing had its effect. Lorde admitted, "I was forced to look upon myself and my living with a harsh and urgent clarity that has left me still shaken but much stronger...." The experience forced her to get clarity "concerning the transformation of silence into language and action." She added, I "betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words."

Lorde continued, "I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. **My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.**" (Emphasis Touchstones)

How often do people, especially people from marginalized communities, remain silent in the face of workplace discrimination for fear of retribution or negative consequences, or, when faced with stereotypes or microaggressions, to avoid confrontation or being labeled as

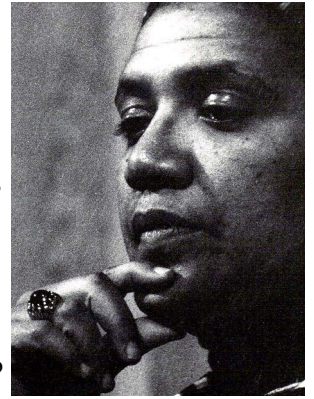
"difficult" or "sensitive," or experiencing domestic abuse or sexual harassment?

Lorde asked, "What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?"

Why do harmful silences persist? Lorde writes, "In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live... And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength." Lorde knew and took the risk: "The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. **And there are so many silences to be broken.**" (Emphasis Touchstones) Breaking the silence is a form of activism.

Lorde saw language as a powerful form of resistance against systemic "isms." Rather than resorting to violence, she believed marginalized individuals and communities must reclaim and redefine language to articulate their experiences, challenge oppressive systems, and empower themselves. Of course, language was just one form of activism. But if we doubt the power of language, why are officials banning so many books for children and teenagers? Why was there such a negative reaction to *The 1619 Project*? And why did administrators in Tennessee ban Lorde's book, *Sister Outsider*, which included this speech about transforming silence into language and action? Your silence will not protect you!

Source: Touchstones



# Small Group Discussion Guide

# We Are the Ones

## Theme for Discussion Activism

**Preparation prior to Gathering:** (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** "Activism is not limited to the grand gestures or the large-scale movements; it begins with the small acts of kindness and compassion we show to one another every day. It is about recognizing that our individual actions, when combined, can create a ripple effect that can bring about real and lasting change. Never underestimate the power of your voice, your actions, and your ability to inspire others." *Malala Yousafzai*

**Chalice Lighting:** (James Vila Blake) adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

**Read the Wisdom Story:** Take turns reading aloud the wisdom story on page 1.

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

**Sitting In Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

**Reading:** "The path of activism is not an easy one. It is filled with obstacles, setbacks, and moments of doubt. But remember, every great movement in history started with just a few individuals who dared to challenge the status quo. It is in those

moments of adversity that our true strength and resilience are tested. Stay true to your convictions, stand firm in your beliefs, and never give up on the pursuit of a more just and equitable world." *Nelson Mandela*

**Living the Questions:** Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. How do you feel about activism? Why? What passions animate your life? Do any relate to justice making? How?
2. On a continuum between spirituality and activism, where would you place yourself? Why? Per bell hooks, "activism and spirituality go hand in hand." Do you agree? How can each support the other?
3. Have you been involved in social justice efforts? What did you value about the experiences? What did you struggle with?
4. Have you participated in community service projects? What is an example? How did you feel about it? Do you prefer these to activism? Why or why not?
5. How do art, culture, creative expressions, and symbols contribute to social change?
6. How do different generations approach activism? What can older activists learn from younger ones, and vice versa?
7. What are the roles and responsibilities of allies in supporting activist movements and marginalized communities?
8. How can we sustain activism and avoid burnout or compassion fatigue?
9. What value do you place on secondary activism, those actions that can support activists either directly or indirectly? What are some examples?
10. Should your congregation be involved in activism? If no, why not? If yes, how?

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about your time together.

**Extinguishing Chalice:** (Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

**Closing Words:** (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

Rev. Philip R. Giles

(Continued from page 6) **Introduction**

If we lived in a utopia, activism would be unnecessary. Because we don't, the existing inequity, oppression, power structures, and violence cannot go unchallenged if we value the idea, the ideal, and the possibility of a more perfect union. Activism beyond politics and other spheres of power creates the space where imagination for the Beloved Community can flourish. Activism is also mindful of Frederick Douglass, who said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." (See <https://justseeds.org/product/power-concedes-nothing-without-demand/>)

In her 1978 poem, *Poem for South African Women*, Jamaican-American poet June Jordan wrote, "We are the ones we've been waiting for." (See <http://www.junejordan.net/poem-for-south-african-women.html> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o09Y23AVZW0> and <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/1956-womens-march-pretoria-9-august>).

The poem was a commemoration of the more than 20,000 women who, on August 9, 1956, marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the capital of apartheid, to protest against the *dompass*, i.e., the official document that black people had to carry with them to prove their identity and where they could live or work. Jordan read her poem at the United Nations on August 9, 1978, an anniversary of that march. Jordan also wrote, "And maybe the unity of resistance to hatred that will stop that hatred seems improbable. ...Maybe. But, meanwhile, I am moving on an irrepressible wish that all of us will: All of us will build that circle of our common safety that all of us deserve." As we sing Hymn #155 by Linda Hirschhorn in *Singing the Living Tradition* so may we live: "Circle 'round for freedom, circle 'round for peace, / for all of us imprisoned, circle for release, / circle for the planet, circle for each soul, / for the children of our children, keep the circle whole." (Listen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11FUz0b3e-E&t=28s>)

### Attribution

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**Page 3:** Ceramic bowl, photo by Lidy on Unsplash

**Page 3:** #BLM, photo by Clay Banks on Unsplash

**Page 4:** Unitarian symbol, <https://westforkuu.org/2019/09/23/sunday-september-29-2019-serpents-and-doves/>

**Page 5:** Children Marching, photo by K6ka, September 27, 2019, (CC BY-SA 3.0) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22Stop\\_Global\\_Warming%22\\_child\\_demonstrators\\_in\\_Toronto\\_27\\_Sep\\_2019.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22Stop_Global_Warming%22_child_demonstrators_in_Toronto_27_Sep_2019.jpg)

**Page 6:** Black Lives Matter by Life Matters on Pexels

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